

A conversation with director Lisa Rovner about *Sisters with Transistors*

Erik Schreiber
22 April 2021

The *World Socialist Web Site* had the opportunity recently to interview director Lisa Rovner about her documentary *Sisters with Transistors*, which surveys women who performed and composed electronic music in the 20th century. Despite the prejudices and obstacles they confronted, some of the women who pursued careers as musicians or composers during this period gained broad recognition. Others have been less widely known. Artistic reputations sometimes change, and composers' work periodically undergoes critical reevaluation.

Ultimately, what enables a work to endure is not the gender of the artist, but the extent to which the work reveals important truths about the world and about human society. *Sisters with Transistors* has the potential to introduce a broader public to electronic music and prompt reevaluations of the composers that it profiles.

WSWS: What prompted you to make a documentary about electronic music?

Lisa Rovner: Like most people, when I thought of early electronic music, I thought of men pushing buttons, knobs and boundaries. So, when I discovered a timeline of female pioneers in electronic music and began to look into Clara Rockmore, Daphne Oram, Bebe Barron, Delia Derbyshire, Maryanne Amacher, Pauline Oliveros, Wendy Carlos, Éliane Radigue, Suzanne Ciani and Laurie Spiegel, and realized these women photographed with machines were among the greatest pioneers of modern sound, I was compelled to break the silence that surrounded their stories.

I studied political science in Canada, so ever since my early 20s I have been thinking deeply about the politics behind storytelling, the stories we're told, the stories we're not told and the consequences. I think all of my work in some way or another revolves around

confronting dominant narratives with counternarratives.

WSWS: One thing that struck me about the film is how it demonstrates the direct influence of technological and historical developments on the artists and their work. Could you elaborate on this influence? Did you incorporate this thesis into the film deliberately?

LR: I found the historical, social and technological context behind these very modern women and sounds fascinating. I had no idea just how tied the origins of electronic music were to war. Both in terms of the instruments themselves, but also in terms of women gaining access to them, due to jobs vacated by men who had gone to fight. In the film, Laurie Spiegel explains that women were especially drawn to electronic music when the possibility of a woman composing was in itself controversial. Electronics enabled women to make music that could be heard by others without having to be taken seriously by the male-dominated establishment.

WSWS: How would you describe the relationship between electronic music and the other artistic and historical developments of the 20th century?

LR: Gosh, that's a big question. Where to start? For one thing, there are so many parallels between experimental music and experimental films. Both in terms of how it was made, often on shoestring budgets and without institutional funding, but also in terms of what both the filmmakers and composer/musicians were looking to express and explore: time, space, perception. Both represent a radical break from tradition. Both can be perceived as difficult for audiences.

WSWS: One question to which people refer repeatedly in the movie is whether electronic music is music at all. What is your perspective about this

question?

LR: I didn't realize that electronic music not only changed the modes of production, but in its wide-ranging effects also transformed the very definition of music. At the time when these radical sounds were first being heard, people for the most part rejected electronic music. Clara Rockmore talks about needing to convince people in the 1920s and '30s that playing the Theremin was a real artistic pursuit. Delia Derbyshire is credited as making electronic music beautiful, that surely helped, but in an interview with Éliane Radigue from the '80s, she talks about the music establishment not considering her electronic compositions on Synthesizer music, revealing the struggle continued well into recent times.

WSWS: Although we see composers such as Radigue, Spiegel, and Ciani in the current day, we do not see any composers who emerged in the 1980s or afterward. Why is that?

LR: The film is about early electronic music, which starts in the 1920s! It just seemed right to end with the advent of computer music because everyone is making music with computers and software like the one Laurie [Spiegel] created. Plus, there is only so much you can cover in a feature-length film. I'd like to remind people that *Sisters with Transistors* isn't a definitive history of electronic music, and it was incredibly challenging to find archive on the composers featured. There are many more artists who have been overlooked, and more we've yet to know about. This film is a jumping off point to recognize electronic artists who've been marginalized and overlooked.

WSWS: What do you hope that audiences take away from this film?

LR: Daphne Oram, one of the subjects of the film says it best: "Do not let us fall into the trap of trying to name one man as the 'inventor' of electronic music. As with most inventions, we shall find that ... many minds were, almost simultaneously, excited into visualizing far-reaching possibilities. New developments are rarely, if ever, the complete and singular achievement of one mind ... I wonder why we want so much to see one man as the hero of the occasion."

I hope that people walk away with a new understanding of the importance of listening, especially for what's been left out. Pauline Oliveros, one of the

subjects in the film argued that listening was a form of activism and that through deep and inclusive listening we could heal. I couldn't agree more.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact